

THE

NEER-DO-WELL

A Romance of the Panama Canal

BY
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CHAPTER

Kirk Anthony is Spied.

Kirk Anthony was an instant by the entrance of the office, then he went out through a back structure to the cable office, where he wrote a message, only to have it lost.

"We don't send C. O.," the operator told him.

"Must have coin in the box, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"I left my gold purse in the dresser," Kirk said cheerfully. "I'll be back later." Then he wandered forth again, resolved to enlist the aid of the American Consul.

After some wandering he found the consul's house and knocked at the door. A woman on a high pile of questions came inside crying:

"In. Damned! stand in the doorway!"

"Entered to find him, gloomily clad in a faded blue suit, dusty Morris cane and slippers."

"The man's face and neck were a purplish, ashy blue; he radiated heat waves like a furnace."

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Mr. Weeks was even better than his word. He put up his guest at the club and invited some of his friends to join them for dinner that evening on the wide balcony; then, noting Anthony's heavy clothing, he said:

"You need some linen. Kirk. That suit looks like a dog bed. You don't mind my calling you Kirk, do you? There's a Chinese tailor on Bottle alley who'll have you a suit to measure by noon tomorrow, and he only charges \$7.50 and all."

Accordingly the two journeyed to Bottle alley and selected some linen. When upon instead of one suit the consul ordered three, having them charged to his account.

Kirk really enjoyed that evening at the Weyfarers' club, for once the cool of evening had come the place filled up rapidly with as fine a crowd of men as he had ever met. There were young fellows from the railroad offices, merchants from the town, engineers from the BIG JOB, the proximity of which made itself felt like a mysterious presence. They were all men with work to do; there were no idlers; there was no class distinction. One topic of conversation prevailed.

Weeks did himself credit as a host. Both the food and the wine were well served, and the consul's half dozen guests soon became mellowed and friendly. When finally they arose some one proposed a game of draw poker and insisted upon Kirk's joining. He was about to refuse when Weeks drew him aside to say:

"Don't let the money question stand in your way, Kirk. You're my guest, and your I. O. U. is as good as a government bond, so go as far as you like."

A considerable portion of Anthony's time in college had been devoted to a course in draw poker. But he soon found that these men had forgotten more about the game than he could ever hope to learn at any university, and when the crowd broke up at midnight he signed his name to a tab for \$40.

Early the next day the following cablegram was left at the American consulate:

Weeks, Consul, Colon: Anthony absent, returns Friday.

COPY.

"Copley is the governor's secretary," Kirk explained. "That means that I'll

miss the Santa Cruz and have to wait another week."

"I'm delighted," the consul said heartily.

"Perhaps you could stake me to a ticket. I'll remit when I get to New York."

"My pay isn't due for a fortnight," Weeks explained after an instant's hesitation. "You see, I'm interested in so many ventures it keeps me well broke. Anyhow, you can't go until we have arranged an investment for your father."

Not wishing to embarrass his host, he refrained from pressing the matter and resigned himself as best he could to an extension of his exile. Meanwhile he decided to visit the canal.

But his plans were upset by the weather. On the following day it began to rain, and it continued to rain day and night thereafter until Colon became a sodden, dripping horror. The soil melted into a quagmire, the streets became slicks, the heavens closed down like a leaden pall, and the very air became saturated. It was hot also and sticky.

It was too much for Kirk, and he deferred his trip over the "line," spending his time instead at the Weyfarers' club. In his daylight hours he listened to Weeks' unending dissertations upon the riches of the tropics. At night he played poker with such uniform bad luck that his opponents developed for him an increasing affection.

But all things have an end, and Friday morning broke clear and hot.

"We'll hear from the old gentleman today sure," he told Weeks at breakfast. "He's regularly itself. The train dispatchers set their watches by him." He then declared his determination to avail himself of the good weather and see something of the town. The prospect of squaring his account with the fawning fat man filled him with relief, and once away from the consulate he stayed until late in the afternoon. It was nearly dark when he strolled in to inquire:

"Well, did you get an answer?"

"Yes. Here's the message; read it yourself."

Kirk read as follows:

Weeks, Consul, Colon: Your guest an impostor. No more.

"Well, I'm blanked!" he exclaimed. "This is a joke."

Weeks was beginning to get on his feet when he was interrupted by a knock.

"Come in," he called.

"It's me," said the consul.

"What's up?"

"I've just got a letter from your father."

"What's it say?"

"He says to tell you that he's coming to see you tomorrow."

"That's good," Kirk said.

"Yes, it is. He's coming to see you tomorrow."

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"I suppose it was a joke to me?"

"You believe I'm Kirk Anthony?"

"No, I do not. I just discovered that your name is Jefferson Locke."

"I told me."

"I thought you were."

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"I'm starving. I must get something into my stomach—it's as flat as a wafer."

The Jamaican rose, saying: "Step this way, please. I know the place where a very good female is. Perhaps she will make us a present."

"How far is it?"

"Oh, not too far," Allan replied optimistically, and Kirk hopefully followed him.

But at the opposite side of the square they were halted by a sudden commotion which drove all thoughts of food out of their minds. From a building across the street issued a huge call, upon which a tremendous confusion broke forth. Men began running to and fro; a voice in authority shouted orders, each of which was the signal for another huge call. Through the wide open doors the Panamanians could be heard scurrying around a hose cart, apparently in search of clothes.

"Oh, look, boss!" Allan cried quickly. "There must be a 'flagration'."

"It's a Spigoty hose company, as I live. Come on!"

Already a glare could be seen above the crowded portion of the city, and the two set off in that direction at a run, leaving the huge sounding in the rear and the militant firemen still wrestling with their uniforms. They had nearly reached the fire when around a corner back of them, with frightful speed and clangor, came a modern automobile fire truck, clanging to which was a swarm of little brown men in red shirts and helmets. Without a pause the Yankee machine whizzed on up the street, its siren clanging, its occupants holding on for dear life, the peaceful inhabitants of Colon fleeing from its path.

Kirk and his guide fell in behind and jogged to the scene of the conflagration.

A three storied building was already half gutted. Out of its windows roared long, fiery tongues. The structure snapped and veiled a chorus to the sufferer's cry of destruction. The street was littered with the household belongings of the neighborhood. On all sides was a bedlam which augmented the fire captain's shouted orders to the buglers, the buglers blew feebly upon their horns, the companies deployed in obedience to the buglers. Then everybody waited for further directions.

Again the trumpet sounded, whereupon each fireman began to lurch with his neighbor. A series of quarrels arose as couplings were made or broken. Then, after an interminable delay, water began to flow as if by a miracle; but, except in rare instances, it failed to reach the flames. A ladder truck, drawn by another excited company, now rumbled upon the scene, its arrival adding to the general disorder. Meanwhile the steady trade wind fanned the blaze to ever growing proportions.

"Why the devil don't they get closer?" Kirk inquired of his Jamaican companion.

"Oh, Lord, my God, it is too 'ot, sar, greatly too 'ot! It would take a stout 'eart to do such a thing."

"Nonsense. They'll never put it out this way. Hey?" Kirk attracted the attention of a nearby nozzlemann.

"Walk up to it. It won't bite you."

But the valiant fire fighter held stubbornly to his post, while the stream he directed continued to describe a graceful curve and spatter upon the sidewalk in front of the burning building. "You're spoiling that old woman's bed," Anthony warned him, at which a policeman with drawn club forced him back as if resentful of criticism.

For perhaps ten minutes there was no further change in the situation. Then a great shout arose as it was seen that the roof of an adjoining building had burst into flame. At this the fanfare of trumpets sounded again. Firemen rushed down the street, dragging a line of hose and drenching the onlookers. But, despite their hurry, they failed to reach the blazing roof. By now the heat had grown really intense, and the more hardy heroes in the vanguard retreated to less trying positions. The voice of the crowd had arisen to a roar rivaling that of the flames.

Kirk pointed to the nearest fireman. "If he'd get up under that wall he could save the roof and be out of the heat. I can't stand this. Let's give him a hand, Allan."

"Very well, sar."

"Here! Help me get a kink in this hose. There! Now you hold it until you feel me pull." Kirk forced his way out through the crowd to find the fireman holding the nozzle, from which a feeble stream was dribbling, and mechanically directing it at the fire. Kirk laid hold of the canvas and, with a heave, dragged it along with his right hand, ten feet forward. But there had been no huge blown order for this, and the uniformed man pulled backward with all his might, chattering at Kirk in Spanish.

"Well, then, let go," Anthony shook the Panamanian loose, then ran forward across the street until he brought up at the end of the slack and felt the hose behind him writhe and swell as Allan released his hold. The next instant the negro was at his side, and the two found themselves half blistered by the heat that rolled out upon them. But the newly ignited roof was within range, and the stream they played upon it made the shingles fly.

The fireman they had despised began to drag at the hose from a safe distance, but when Kirk made as if to turn the nozzle upon him he scampered away amid the jeers of the crowd. A few moments later the American felt a hand upon his arm and saw an angry policeman who was evidently ordering him back. Behind him stood the excited nozzlemann with two companions.

"He says you should return the hose where you found it," Allan translated.

"Leave us alone," Kirk replied. "You fellows help the others. We'll attend to this." More rapid words and gestures followed. In the midst of which a dapper young man in a uniform somewhat more impressive than the others dashed up, flung himself upon Anthony and endeavored to

wrench the hose from his hands. Meanwhile he uttered epithets in broken English which the other had no difficulty in understanding. Kirk promptly turned the nozzle upon him, and the full force of Colon's water pressure struck him squarely in the stomach, doubling him up like the kick of a mule. Down the newcomer went, then half rolled, half slid across the street as the stream continued to play upon him.

"I guess they'll keep away now," laughed Kirk, as he turned back to his self-appointed task.

But an instant later a half dozen policemen advanced in a businesslike manner, and their leader announced: "Come, you are under arrest."

"Pinned—what for? We're doing a lot of good here."